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Bay Of Pigs Poses Some Vital Lessons For Johnson

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WASHINGTON—The specter of the worst foreign policy disaster of the Kennedy years hung over Lyndon B. Johnson this weekend as he struggled with the most critical decision of his own Presidency.

Laid out before him were the uncomfortable lessons of the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion which came close to destroying the late John F. Kennedy as a political leader in his third month in office in April, 1961.

The lessons, which have a direct bearing on the war in Viet Nam, were presented in separate accounts by three Kennedy advisers with intimate knowledge of the Cuban debacle —Theodore C. Sorensen, Kennedy's chief adviser; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., another close White House Aide, and Richard M. Bissell, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the man in charge of the invasion.

Required Reading

Their revelations must have been required reading at the White House as President Johnson and his leading advisers moved toward a decision on whether to engage U.S troops in a full-scale land war in Southeast Asia.

For the post-mortems on the Bay of Pigs underscored several key dilemmas which confront a President and a government in times of grave national crisis.

1 It is very difficult for a President, any President, to receive straight and candid advice from his subordinates.

The President is the most powerful individual in the world and underlings are hesitant to contradict him or set policy for fear of their jobs, their influence, or even the possibility that they will be considered "soft."

Opposed To Invasion

Schlesinger makes it clear that Kennedy was opposed to the Bay of Pigs invasion but largely held his tongue out of mistaken awe of established and famous government experts.

"Had one adviser opposed the adventure," Schlesinger wrote, "I believe that Kennedy would have canceled it. Not one spoke against it."

Schlesinger, Sorenson and Bissell agree that the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to express to the President their misgivings about changes in the invasion plan, perhaps because they unconsciously felt that the scheme would be abandoned if they objected.

2 There is a strong temptation for a President to let his own political instincts be overridden by the opinions of the experts.

"You always assume," Schlesinger quotes Kennedy as saying later, "that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."

"How could I have been so far off base?" Sorensen recalls Kennedy remarking. "All my life I've known better than to depend on the experts. How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"

3 It is extremely difficult for a President to be sure that his subordinates are carrying out his orders as he intended them.

Sorensen points out that former President Dwight D. Eisenhower's original plan for a guerrilla infiltration of Cuba was transformed by the CIA into a conventional invasion—"although Eisenhower was apparently not informed of the decision."

Sorensen and Schlesinger both contended that, despite Kennedy's absolute prohibition on the use of open U.S military force in the invasion, the CIA proceeded on the assumption —conscious or unconscious—that the President would reverse himself at the last minute if necessary to bail out a faltering operation.

4 It is difficult for a President to separate the hard facts from the wishful assessments of his advisers.

Sorensen and Schlesinger point out that the CIA estimated there was mass discontent in Cuba whereas relatively little existed; and that some type of popular uprising would occur after the invasion whereas none materialized.

5 It is difficult for a President to control or cancel a major operation once it is launched.

Schlesinger contends that by the time Kennedy came into office, the invasion plan had taken on an independent and all but irreversible life of its own. The President learned to his regret, Schlesinger writes, that "contingency planning could generate its own momentum and create its own reality."

Bissell notes that Kennedy was confronted, in effect, by a Frankenstein monster. If he had abandoned the operation, the big Cuban exile invasion force in Central America might have gone on a rampage.

"They were the most powerful military force between Mexico and Panama," Bissell observed, "and it is entirely possible that they might have tried to seize a base in Nicaragua, Honduras or Guatemala. There is not the slightest doubt that they could have defeated any Guatemalan force."

6 It is difficult for a President to keep domestic politics out of major foreign policy decisions.

As Sorensen remarks, the President was, in effect, challenged on taking office as to "whether he was as willing as the Republicans to permit and assist these exiles to free their own island from dictatorship, or whether he was willing to liquidate their well-laid preparations . . . and have them spread the word that Kennedy had betrayed their attempt to depose Castro."

These are some of the lessons which the Bay of Pigs hold for President Johnson in his own moment of truth. Whether he has mastered them may soon become known in the bloody jungles of Viet Nam.